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ABSTRACT

Approaches to the assessment of literacy skills in bilingual learners, particularly learners of English as a Second Language, are discussed. Literature is reviewed and an assessment technique that attempts to identify both strengths and needs of bilingual learners is outlined. It is argued that current assessment of bilingual readers is based largely on understanding of the reading strategies of monolingual learners, and does not address variation in text processing across languages. It is further proposed that literacy assessment of bilingual readers could be made more effective if three factors received more attention: (1) language of assessment, i.e., first and/or second language; (2) cultural content of assessment materials; and (3) assessment strategies. Three assessment strategies are described: reciprocal questioning; communicative modeling and thinking-aloud; and elaborative response and inquiry. Following this discussion, a guide for assessing the literacy knowledge of bilingual learners, both individually and in the classroom situation, is presented. Specific procedures for use of the three assessment strategies, and specific evaluation criteria, are offered. In addition, a technique for recording student reading behaviors is suggested. (MSE)

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Assessing the Literacy Knowledge of Bilingual Learners

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PART I

Assessing the Literacy Knowledge of Bilingual Learners

Within the last decade, a multitude of assessment and instructional approaches have been proposed to address the ways in which educators and evaluators teach students to improve their reading abilities. Most of these efforts have been geared toward mainstream, native speakers of English. Practices intended to meet the reading needs of those who do not comprise that population have been less evident in the professional literature. It is this population, namely the bilingual and second language reader, that is the target of this assessment approach.

Bernhardt's (1986) review of second language reading research conducted between 1974 and 1986 exposes the stark contrast between research efforts in mainstream and second language reading. While this review revealed "thousands of studies" of mainstream readers, only a fraction of that number of investigations of second language readers were reported. This imbalance causes concern when one considers the fact that bilingual readers are by no means a new presence in American schools. It becomes even more alarming, however, in light of the projection that within the coming decade, schools will experience an unprecedented increase in the enrollment of bilingual students. It is estimated that by the year 2000, Hispanics, Asians, East Europeans, Haitians, and other minorities will comprise at least one third of the U.S. population and 40 percent of the school-age population (Hodgkinson 1987). Acknowledging these figures provides a strong impetus for, and underscores the need, to pursue measures of assessment that accurately identify both the strengths and needs of bilingual learners.

Building on the basic premises of Intervention Assessment (Paratore and Indrisano, 1987) the measures outlined in this approach recognize the particular and varied needs of the bilingual reader population, and address issues related to culture,

language, content and communicative strategies for assessment.

Rationale

Current assessment of bilingual readers is largely based on our understanding of reading strategies of monolingual learners. Reliance on this body of literature can be attributed partially to the scarcity of second language reading research as reported above. In addition, however, there seems to be a general assumption among many educators that text processing is accomplished in a similar manner in both first (L1) and second (L2) language reading. While there is considerable controversy and disagreement regarding the accuracy of this assumption (McLeod and McLaughlin, 1986) recent models of second language reading have joined aspects from both L1 and L2 reading research in an attempt to address issues that are sensitive to language and cultural differences, as well as to the interactive nature of top down and bottom up language processing (Goodman, Goodman & Flores,1979; Ammon 1987; Long and Richards, 1988). Examination of these multivariate reading models suggests that literacy assessment of bilingual readers could be more effective if three factors received greater attention. These include the language of assessment, assessment materials, and assessment strategies.

In the following sections each of these areas is addressed. A formal assessment guide is provided to help the examiner administer and evaluate the student according to the factors and criteria outlined in this approach. The term examiner refers to individuals who are in positions of evaluating students, either in the clinical or classroom setting.

Language of Assessment

Until recently, the trend in assessment in the United States has been to evaluate bilingual learners under monolingual conditions within the context of the target

language (usually English) only. This practice represents a source of considerable concern, since the findings indicate that results are frequently incomplete profiles, inaccurate diagnoses and inappropriate instruction (Cummins, 1984).

Monolingual evaluations deny the bilingual learner the opportunity to demonstrate strategies developed and utilized in the first language (L1), but not yet accessible in the second or target language. In addition, limiting the language of assessment to the target language denies the examiner the opportunity for comparative analysis, using information based on the distance and difference between what the individual can presently achieve in L2 and his/her potential as represented by performance in L1.

Use of both first (L1) and second (L2) language in the assessment of bilingual readers could occur in a number of ways. One option is to administer two separate assessments, one in the first language (L1) and another in the second language (L2), and assess the learner's use of strategies in both languages. Questions which might guide the analysis could include:

1. Does the student utilize prediction and questioning to set purpose when reading in both L1 and L2?
2. Does the student organize information effectively when reading in both L1 and L2?
3. Is the student able to answer questions and engage in discussion after reading in L1 and L2?
4. Does the student access and relate appropriate background knowledge to support understanding when reading in L1 and L2?
5. Is the student able to compose a summary after reading in both L1 and L2?
6. Is the student able to self-monitor reading in both L1 and L2?
7. Is the student able to initiate fix-up strategies as necessary in both L1 and L2 ?
8. Is the student using L1 to support performance in L2?

A second option is to join the use of the first and second languages in the same assessment opportunity, using the first language as a bridge to more effective performance in the second language. For example, a primary component of

Intervention Assessment, as described by Paratore and Indrisano (1987) is the prereading assessment. This part of the assessment evaluates the learner's strategies for getting ready to read by accessing and relating background knowledge and predicting the content of the selection. For bilingual learners, the prereading assessment might occur in the first language, so that the learner's focus is the reading process, rather than on language production. In utilizing this suggestion, the following procedure is followed. The reader is provided a text to read in the second language. Before reading, the student is asked to preview the text to make predictions or pose questions about the selection. This prereading discussion occurs in the learner's first language. This fulfills the dual function of establishing a communicative and interactive approach to reading and of providing the examiner with baseline data. Next, the learner is asked to read the text silently. After reading, the learner is asked to retell or provide questions about the important parts of the selection and to answer specific questions. The retelling and question posing and answering may occur in either the first (L1) or second language (L2).

When this procedure is used, the student's first language serves as an intervention strategy, permitting the learner to succeed at a task that might otherwise be too difficult. It is consistent with the notion of scaffolding (Bruner, 1983; Applebee and Langer, 1983; Cazden, 1988) and builds on the Vygotskian concept of the "zone of proximal development":

> .....the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers." (Vygotsky, 1978, p.86)

It evolves, as well, from the notion of the "bilingual zone of proximal development" (Brown and Ferrara, 1985; Moll, 1981), and provides valuable information about the ways in which the learners' knowledge of first language reading strategies might serve

as a scaffold or bridge to more effective second language reading.

> ....."By concentrating on a level a student can reach with aid, the student is led to levels of success previously not envisaged by either the student or the teacher" (Brown & Ferrara, 1985, p.301)

Assessment Materials

It is well documented that what learners bring to the reading process in terms of schema and background knowledge strongly influences their ability to gain full access to the meaning of the text. When readers' background knowledge is substantially different from or culturally incongruent with the author's perspective, as is often the case with bilingual learners, comprehension is likely to suffer. In fact, there's evidence to suggest that unfamiliar content presents a greater interference factor in comprehension than does unfamiliar form (Carrell, 1987). When bilingual students are assessed using reading materials restricted to content selected for mainstream learners, inadequate comprehension may occur not because learners lack appropriate reading knowledge or strategies, but because they do not possess background knowledge and experience necessary to access the author's meaning. In order to gain greater and more accurate insight into bilingual students' comprehension abilities, it is suggested that two culturally distinct passages be used, one including content representative of the native culture of the reader and the other including content characteristic of the mainstream culture. While quality literature representing minority cultures is less attainable, it is becoming increasingly more available and more easily accessible.[1] An analysis of knowledge and strategies students use when

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[1] Stories representative of different cultures are available from the Education and Reading Committee Project, Annotations of International Children's Fiction Books, 1987, Information Center on Children's Cultures. U.S. Committee for UNICEF, NY, NY.

reading materials that are representative of both first and second language cultures is likely to identify strengths as well as needs, providing a more complete profile of the learner than assessments which focus on mainstream literature alone.

Assessment Strategies

As in the other components of this assessment, the proposed strategies are intended to minimize the impact of diminished proficiency in either of the bilinguals' two languages and maximize the learner's ability to demonstrate knowledge of reading strategies.

Reciprocal Questioning

Reciprocal questioning used in the reading process can best be described as an interactive approach wherein two or more readers ask questions of each other in order to gain access to and demonstrate an understanding of text. Since most bilinguals have greater ease with receptive language processing than productive language use (Goodman, Goodman & Flores, 1979; Krashen & Terrel, 1983) in the second language, tapping into comprehension through the traditional means of examiner question and reader response may be both inappropriate and counter productive to the objectives of the assessment. A communicative alternative provides the reader with a purposeful approach to interacting with the text and a meaningful context in which to engage productive language use. It evolves from the reciprocal teaching strategies developed and validated by Manzo (1969) and Brown and Palinscar (1985). The procedure involves the reading of a selection by both the examiner and the teacher, followed by questions generated by the learner first, and by the examiner when intervention (i.e.modeling and demonstration) is warranted.

The rationale for application of this strategy to assessment for bilingual learners is based on three assumptions: 1) that reader generated questions, before, during and after the reading process give as much insight (and possibly more) into the thinking strategies and background knowledge of the learner as do answers to questions. This assumption is supported by the fact that generating effective questions requires awareness of the important ideas in text and the interrelationships among ideas. The types of questions students ask provide a reliable measure of the elements of text upon which the learner focuses attention during reading; 2) question-asking provides a meaningful and thus a communicative context within which the social need to produce language is created; 3) the impact of being solely responsible for language production is minimized through a reciprocal questioning arrangement. In addition, the reader has the option of composing his/her thoughts in the native language and then formulating a relevant question in the native or second language as a summary of that thinking process. In this way, both anxiety and frustration levels of the learner may be diminished and thus would be less likely to interfere with reading performance.

Reciprocal questioning can accomplish several objectives as an assessment procedure with second language learners: 1) reader's attention focusing and thinking strategies can be assessed based on the types of questions that arise during reading; 2) learner's awareness of important information in text can be evaluated based on the types of questions students ask after reading; 3) student's present capacity to learn from demonstration and guided practice can be assessed based on the student's response to and use of the examiner's model, providing useful information for planning corrective instruction. (Pearson and Gallagher, 1983; Brown and Palinscar, 1985).

Communicative Modeling and Think-Alouds as Intervention Strategies

Communicative modeling is based on the evidence that language is acquired

through a process of imitation, recreation and development (Ervin-Tripp, 1974; Snow, 1981). It can best be understood as a conversational approach to demonstrating a way of interacting with text. It is intended to provide the reader with the language that is needed to acquire and demonstrate a "task appropriate" reading strategy, and creates a vehicle for assessing the learner's performance once the language has been provided. In this assessment, it is joined with the evidence on the effectiveness of "thinking-aloud" as an instructional strategy (Paris, 1984), and utilized as one way to gain insight into the learner's current capacity to acquire and use particular reading strategies given the appropriate amount of expert modeling and interaction. As with other parts of the assessment, it builds on the importance of providing scaffolding as a means of observing student's potential for improved performance.

Using communicative language and think-aloud strategies, both the language and the processes needed to overcome comprehension difficulty can be demonstrated. The examiner can then look for points in the selection to elicit the questions and language already modeled, observing the student's performance with modeling and guided practice. Similarly, the evaluator can observe the reader's use of language in a meaningful and communicative situation and, if necessary, adjust the communicative interaction to a level that facilitates comprehension. The extent and type of language modification represents another type of intervention and provides insight into strategies that will permit the reader to perform effectively. What is ultimately targeted is the learner's release from mediation toward a self-guided control of both strategy and language use (Pearson and Gallagher, 1983; Brown and Palinscar, 1985).

Elaborative Response and Inquiry

Techniques of elaboration have been found to yield successful results in reading comprehension. (Bransford 1985, Weinstein 1982, Wong & Sawatsky, 1984). Elaborative response and inquiry can best be described as ways of increasing one's

involvement with text by enlarging the instances of response and inquiry. Elaboration is particularly useful for the second language learner because it serves both comprehension and language learning needs. The reader must make use of the language to generate relationships and clarify meaning. Furthermore, elaboration requires increased level and depth of processing, which in turn facilitates retention, recall and comprehension. As new information is linked to longterm memory, two positive effects are made on the student's learning rate. First, elaboration establishes alternate pathways for the increased retrieval of information, and second, elaboration provides additional information which helps the construction of new ideas. (Gagne, 1985) As elaborations are developed, they create meaning between the concepts that are associated, and the more meaningful the association, the greater the learning. (Fleming & Levie, 1978)

In the context of assessment, elaboration serves as a connection making strategy. Students are taught to link a particular concept or idea in the reading passage to their native culture or language. As in earlier examples, this procedure is first modeled for the learner, followed by a series of opportunities for the learner to engage in guided practice and application.

Elaborating through self-questioning and through linking familiar concepts and experiences can be an effective means of tapping the thinking process, helping readers to resolve questions in their minds by extending their involvement with the story. As in other parts of the assessment, the examiner is able to observe the student's capacity to benefit from the strategy and the conditions under which it is most effectively utilized.

Summary

The proposed assessment was designed to acknowledge and accommodate second language learners' linguistic competence and cultural experiences. It is based

on the philosophy that literacy learning is "interactive, dynamic and responsive to instruction" (Paratore and Indrisano, in preparation). Consistent with that philosophy, this model suggests that bilingual students be provided opportunities to demonstrate competence in both their first and second languages, using materials representative of both the native and target cultures, and with strategies that not only permit practice and application of a range of learning options but also provide varied amounts of teacher interaction. It is hoped that this assessment will provide one model for helping educators to continue to distance themselves from the deficit model so often employed with second language learners, and shift the focus to the many strengths that this population brings to the learning situation.

PART II

Guide for:

Assessing the Literacy Knowledge of Bilingual Learners

The assessment/instructional approaches outlined below are suitable for individual and classroom based evaluation opportunities. In a one on one assessment situation it is recommended that the procedure be repeated several times during the course of an academic session (semester, school year) to determine and follow changing areas of strength and need.

Within the classroom situation it is suggested that this approach be carried out over an extended period of time as an ongoing form of classroom based evaluation and instruction or as a summative assessment that extends for several reading periods at the termination of a school session (semester or school year). The approach might work well between students in a cooperative and communicative learning situation, in which students engage each other in reciprocal questioning and elaboration activities.

Affirmed Principles of Assessment

* assessment procedures and evaluation tasks should reflect classroom practices

* evaluation tasks can be planned in such a way that they in themselves become opportunities for learning

* evaluations may and should vary in focus, format and organization

* assessment administered for the purpose of summative evaluation should allow students to incorporate aspects of learning acquired in the tasks from classroom experience

* evaluation should be a democratic process involving collaborative input

Suggestions for Use

A teacher or clinical examiner should feel free to adapt any aspect of the communicative assessment approach to his/her needs and those of the students to whom it is administered. The terms examiner and instructor are used to refer to the clinical and classroom assessment situations respectively.

1. RECIPROCAL QUESTIONING

Implementation of this assessment strategy is as follows:

A) As a prereading measure, the examiner/instructor informs the reader that they will both read the text and then have an opportunity to ask each other questions about it. The learner is provided the text and encouraged to preview it through the generation of questions or predictions about passage content. The examiner asks the reader to share any questions or predictions s/he has, and shares for the purpose of modeling the questioning approach/strategy his/her own as well.

B) Next the examiner/instructor suggests that they both read the text. The reader is encouraged to think out loud and share with the examiner any difficulties or questions that may arise during reading.

C) After reading, the examiner/instructor proposes a game-like interaction, wherein both the reader and examiner/instructor are required to formulate questions related to important information in the text.

*The whole procedure can be accomplished equally well in written or oral form

2. COMMUNICATIVE MODELING AND THINK-ALOUDS

Communicative modeling and think-alouds are implemented in the following ways:

D) The examiner/instructor describes and models strategies which would enable completion of a particular task. For example, in response to the task of reciprocal questioning, the examiner/instructor might assist a learner who is experiencing difficulty by saying, "When I read a story I ask myself questions based on the most important parts. For example, I usually ask myself who the characters are, what kind of problems they had and how they solved them. Let's read the next passage and try to compose questions like those." In this part of the assessment, the learner might also be provided a visual display or story map, to further focus attention on the structure of the story and provide additional assistance in formulating questions.

E) In the case of comprehension difficulties the examiner/instructor might select the text that is causing confusion and demonstrate how fix-up strategies might be applied. For example, "When I came to this part of the story I stopped and thought about what happened before and what might be going to happen next. That helped me to better understand this part." The examiner/instructor could then ask the reader to identify another part of the passage where that strategy might be helpful and observe the student's ability to apply the strategy.

3. ELABORATIVE RESPONSE AND INQUIRY

Elaboration may be modeled in the following ways:

F) "When I want to remember something I've read, I think of things that are familiar to me that will help me remember later on. (here the examiner/instructor demonstrates with a concept from the learner's culture or language)

G) The examiner/instructor might demonstrate how learners can link events in a selection to experiences in their own culture. For example, "How is this particular event or action similar or different from the ways things happen in my family or neighborhood?"

Part III Criteria

The following criteria are designed to serve as guidelines for the evaluation of reading performance using a communicative intervention approach. Consider the following criteria.

Does the student:

A. generate, expand upon and clarify ideas in order to present a viewpoint and/or demonstrate an understanding of text;

Does the student:

B. interrelate own ideas with ideas drawn from the selections in order to express a personal viewpoint and or demonstrate an understanding of the viewpoints of others;

Does the student:

C. employ language effectively and appropriately for the purpose of presenting a personal viewpoint and or statement of understanding of the text.

While the student is engaged in the reading process the following criteria are intended to serve as INDICATORS of reading control in both L1 and L2.

* context established, i.e., setting, character, mood

* attempt to capture the essential (main and supporting details) attributes of the situation

* attempt to preview text expressed through questions or statements

* attempts made to respond to text

* demonstrates metacognitive awareness through strategy application

* shows an ability to elaborate own ideas based on text through think-alouds

* assumes responsibility for overcoming a reading difficulty

* able to apply a reading strategy after modeling and demonstration

* able to compose a summary after reading (oral or written)

* making use of L1 to support and enhance performance in L2 or vice versa

STUDENT PROCESS RECORD

A record of student reading behaviours should be used to augment the learner's awareness of his/her own reading habits and promote self-monitoring. Following the communicative intervention assessment involving reciprocal questioning, think-alouds elaboration and communicative modeling a record of reading strategies should be completed by the student to provide both the examiner and student with insight into the learner's approaches to reading. This data acts as an accompaniment to the initial evaluation procedures by providing supporting evidence.

1. **I tried to understand the story/passage/text by:**

a. underlining words

b. looking up words in the dictionary

c. making notes on the entire story, or individual paragraphs and pages themselves

d. taking notes while I was reading or rereading

e. asking and receiving questions of/from the instructor, another student or examiner

f. rereading _____ times

g. working with a partner by thinking aloud with the teacher or a fellow student

h. working independently

i. using a strategy not listed above_____

_____

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